DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 212 SO 031 288

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TITLE What Passes for Citizenship? Conflict and Feminist Challenges to the Social Studies.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizenship; *Citizenship Education; *Conflict; *Democracy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Feminism; Political Issues; Public Schools; *Social Studies; Student Needs; Textbook Content; Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

Democratic dispositions and skills can be taught by giving students complex political questions to address thoughtfully. Social studies curriculum in North America is constructed around avoiding controversy and thus suffers from a narrow and sometimes stifling viewpoint. The core of the historical narrative presented in public schools has been remarkably resistant to change. Recent textbook revisions have added some information about women and people of color, but often in marginal sidebars rather than in the story's flow. Female "firsts" in formerly male pursuits often are included in textbooks and curriculum documents because they fit the dominant image of "male" activity as to what matters. Feminist pedagogy opens a place where meaningful conflicts may be confronted and new understandings forged in the social studies. A safer learning climate would widen the margins of accepted viewpoints, encourage openness to learning, and initiate analytic dialogue regarding the inevitable paradoxes and discontinuities in democratic life. Knowing the vulnerability of children and adolescents to insecurity and peer censure, an educator could argue that it is unfair to expect all students to participate in conflictual pedagogy. However, people are generally interested in the ideas and activities with which they feel confident. Should not all students get a chance to develop confidence in voicing and substantiating their own opinions? If not in school social studies, where people supposedly prepare for citizenship, then where? Feminist perspectives can illuminate and help remediate the anti-democratic aspects of what sometimes passes for citizenship education. Real inclusion of women's concerns, problems, viewpoints, and cultures inevitably raises conflict, and conflict is the essence of pluralist democracy. (Contains 59 references.) (BT)

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What Pass for Citizenship? Conflict and Feminist Challenges To the Social Studies

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What Passes for Citizenship?
Conflict and Feminist Challenges to the Social Studies

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(Forthcoming in L. Stone & D. McGrath (Eds.), *Gender Paradoxes: Complexity and Diversity across the Life Span* NY: Teachers College Press)

Human life revolves around conflicts -- disagreements, problems, decisions, clashing perspectives or interests. Violence can be a *symptom* of underlying conflicts, or a way of *handling* conflicts, but it is not inevitable. The *nonviolent* confrontation, management, and eventual resolution of such conflicts is what sustains both democratic civil society and private relationships. Like oxygen, conflict can be explosive -- but it is inescapable and essential to life.

Nonviolence (as well as violence) is *learned* behavior. This learning is inextricably bound up in matters of gender identity: although there are broad variations across cultures and contexts, femininity (acting in 'female' ways) is stereotypically associated with nurturing, passive, or collaborative responses to conflict. Masculinity ('male-like' behavior) is stereotypically associated with the opposite — defensive, aggressive, or competitive responses to conflict. These assumptions are so ingrained in many cultures that children learn about how they are expected to manage conflicts, and about their roles and value as citizens, amidst their development as female or male and as sexual beings (Epstein & Johnson 1998, Gordon 1992, Richardson 1998). To illustrate, consider prevailing images of 'good girls' (or 'bad girls') and 'good boys' (or 'bad boys'): how do these individuals

handle conflict? How do they act as 'citizens'? Thus feminist challenges to the social studies — one major venue for citizenship education — raise questions of conflict and conflict resolution.

Even though conflict is natural and inevitable in life, many people are not good at handling it, and most people are uncomfortable with it in some contexts. Because of this discomfort, conflict is frequently avoided in public school curriculum, and especially (ironically enough) in the social studies. At the same time, a glance at news media or popular culture reminds us that people find conflict — social, political, and interpersonal — to be fascinating. Classroom knowledge is suspect in the minds/hearts of learners (not to mention boring) when it ignores the conflicts that students see and live, inside and outside school. Many young people become more involved in classroom learning (verbally, affectively, and cognitively) when multiple viewpoints are respected and aired (Bickmore 1997, McNeil 1986). Students from dominated groups, in particular, may get impatient with conflict-avoidant curriculum that shuts out the contrasting viewpoints embodied by their life experiences (Anzaldúa 1987, Nieto 1994).

> A liberatory pedagogy ... needs to render explicit topics that are most often relegated to realms of null curricula in many mainstream classrooms. Thus silences, omissions, controversy, and taboo subjects ... can become spaces of possibility and self-understanding (Henry 1994, p.312-313).

A student's repertoire of skills for handling conflict, and her confidence in applying those skills, improve with application, elaboration, and practice. A curriculum for *equitable* citizenship, therefore, has to give all youngsters opportunities to practice handling taboo topics and unsettling viewpoints. Social studies curriculum and instruction, in particular, is responsible for rendering explicit the complex social/political issues that are less easily learned in homes and neighborhoods. Only with the skill and confidence that follow from practice can diverse young people, female and male, take their places as full *democratic* citizens who raise their voices and are heard.

Social studies educators cling to citizenship as a core idea, but only some relatively rare approaches to social studies -- those that involve open but respectful confrontation of uncertain information and controversial issues, applied to specific cases -- have been shown to significantly affect young people's actual capacities and behaviors in political life (Hahn 1996, Hepburn 1983). Democratic dispositions and skills can be taught, by giving students complex political questions to address thoughtfully (Avery 1992, Avery et. al. 1999, Bickmore 1999, Ehman 1980, Engle & Ochoa 1988, Houser 1996). Thus careful inclusion of conflicting perspectives in social studies education is worth the risk, because it helps to prepare young women and men to have a voice in social change toward equity and peace.

The Problem: Gender (in)equity in classroom curriculum

Social studies curriculum in North America is constructed around avoiding controversy and thus suffers from a narrow and sometimes stifling viewpoint. It's not quite fair to call this predominant story a 'male' perspective, since it represents only a small proportion of even the male population -- heroes, white dominant-class leaders of government and military actions, and the occasional heroic 'exception' -- as well as very few women. Recent textbook revisions have added some information about women and people of color, but often in literally-marginal side-bars rather than in the flow of the story. The core of the historical narrative presented in public schools has been remarkably resistant to change. Female 'firsts' in formerly male pursuits are often included in textbooks and curriculum documents, because they fit the dominant image of 'male' activity as what matters (Holt 1990, Trecker 1974). Less-tokenizable roles of women that reflect viewpoints that conflict with those of dominant men -- in labor and human rights movements, in building communities, in running farms, in working for peace -- are still noticeably absent from North American social studies materials (Baldwin & Baldwin 1992, Noddings 1992).

Curriculum is not just subject-matter content: people learn from what they experience and practice, including who speaks to whom in class (about what), and who is heard. Boys frequently have several advantages over girls in the "private realm of schooling," such as classroom pedagogy and the lived curriculum of expected behavior (Foster 1992). For example, boys tend to receive more of the teacher's attention, particularly in the form of intellectual or career-enhancing feedback (Gaskell 1992, Sadker, Sadker & Klein 1991, Spender & Sarah 1988, Streitmatter 1994). Hands-on exploratory learning and risk taking are often more encouraged for boys than girls (Griffin 1990, Harwood & Hahn 1992). Girls who are non-disruptive, even when academically successful, are often ignored, while girls who resist aggressively may be sanctioned more harshly than boys who act similarly (Slee 1996). Influenced by gender and other social hierarchies, each young person interacts differently, practices different roles, and draws on different personal resources and knowledge. Even where girls and boys are educated together with the 'same' curriculum, they are not getting the same education about conflict and citizenship.

> ... the relative neglect of attention to girls' actual experience of schooling produces for many girls a sense of alienation from schooling. Equally important, it places girls in the impossible double bind which Pateman refers to: that they are simultaneously encouraged to be the same as, and euql to, boys in the public realm of schooling, and at the same time constructed culturally as different from boys and philosophically as the 'other' in relation to them. Furthermore, this double bind makes girls' relationship to both education and citizenship ambiguous in a way that that of boys is not. (Foster 1992, p.2)

Hidden curriculum such as discipline and 'violence prevention' often implicitly focuses on males — especially minority males — because these populations are generally assumed to be most heavily involved with visible

symptoms of conflict such as school violence and vandalism. Lower-status and minority youth are disproportionately blamed and controlled by educators (Leal 1994, Noguera 1995, Schissel 1997). The kinds of student resistance that are less disruptive, such as absence from school or nonparticipation in activities — are frequently ignored (Slee 1995). Similarly, less-visible kinds of violence that disproportionately limit girls' and 'sissy' boys' access to safe and complete education, such as bullying, peer exclusion, or sexual harassment, are often relatively ignored by school personnel (Bergsgaard 1997, Mahaffey 1992, Pepler & Craig 1994, Rofes 199 , Stein 1995). Thus, some students learn different roles and skills for membership in the community, in comparison with their more privileged peers.

Feminist pedagogy for handling conflict

Autonomous critical thinking is an important aspect of citizenship: people require modeling and practice with conflict to develop such skill (e.g. Engle & Ochoa 1988, Kamii 1991). However, the common male-oriented application of critical thinking -- individualistic competition among viewpoints -- can be exclusionary and damaging, for those whose identities and perspectives are unpopular. Including girls and lower-status students in classroom pedagogies, and feminine/feminist perspectives in curricular content, does *not* necessarily imply debate. Feminist pedagogy embraces diversity, rather than fostering competition among divergent viewpoints, to facilitate self-reflection and "responsible connection with close others" (Stone 1987, p.310). Conflict need not imply disconnection.

Feminist pedagogy opens a place where meaningful conflicts may be confronted and new understandings forged in the social studies. However, given the unequal status and experiences of diverse girls and boys, this learning depends on the creation of a clear margin of safety for all participants. A safer learning climate would widen the margins of accepted viewpoints, encourage openness to learning, and initiate analytic dialogue

regarding the inevitable paradoxes and discontinuities in democratic life (Ellsworth 1997, hooks 19). Feminist teaching brings conficts into the open, but also takes responsibility to confront bigotry and hurtful behavior when it does occur (Ellwood 1993, Gordon 1994, Hernández 1997, Mahaffey 1992). When teachers replace all-knowing inculcation or interrogation with open inquiry, respectful attention to multiple perspectives, and joint construction of understanding, all gain an opportunity to learn democracy.

Knowing the vulnerability of children and adolescents to insecurity and peer censure, one could argue that it is unfair to expect all students to participate in conflictual pedagogy. Recall, however, that people are generally interested in the ideas and activities that they feel confident with: shouldn't all students get a chance to *develop* confidence in voicing and substantiating their own opinions? If not in school social studies, where people supposedly prepare for citizenship, then where? When a timid or formerly-ignored person speaks up in a group, she helps to reshape both her self-expectations and the expectations and interests of her peers (Cohen 1994).

A Dilemma: Conflict and the Burden of Silence for Girls and Women

The danger is that critical or conflictual pedagogy may silence or exclude at the same time that it generates interest (Ellsworth 1989). When even an excellent teacher engages 'the class' in analysis or discussion of discrepant information or divergent viewpoints, often only *some* of the more confident students are directly involved in practicing some semblance of democratic conflict management. Other students remain "alien and separate within" the school (Metz 1978, p.81), practicing an invisible or outsider role. How many girls still enact the old lesson, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all'? Careless confrontation of conflict, especially in mixed-status groups of adolescents, can cause students to withdraw into the temporary safety of silence.

In a long-term observational study of four high school classes that I conducted, both female and male students responded in widely-varying ways to conflictual social studies teaching, even in free flowing discussions (Bickmore 1993, 1997). While more students were generally involved when there was conflict on the table, compared to more traditional pedagogies, more girls than boys (but some of each) still remained silent. When the conflictual topic was framed as a (competitive, aggressive) debate, the disparity between the 'stars' and the 'silent majority' was even bigger. Similarly, in a case study of a seventh grade social studies class discussion, the teacher was surprised when an observer showed him that only thirteen students had participated: "How can that be true?" he asked. "I thought I had everybody talking that day" (Weikel 1995, p.9). Girls and low-status students are somehow taught, early and often, that to be outspoken is not academically relevant, not polite, and even trouble-making (Fine 1987).

A body of feminist scholarship has been sometimes interpreted to indicate that the development of "caring" relationships with students precludes the confrontation of conflict in the curriculum. This is a shaky interpretation, as well as a dangerous conclusion. (Disallowing challenge reinforces existing inequities.) For example, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) refer to classroom conflict as perilous or at least embarrassing, and recommend a class that "constructs truth not through conflict but through consensus... feeling or sensing together" as an alternative model (p. 223). The issue here is semantic, the usage of the word "conflict." While a threat of violent abuse indeed "leaves children speechless and numbed" (p.159), all conflict is not (and does not threaten) violence. Listen to the authors' description of their own learning/theorizing process:

> It was our *continued, and often heated, discussion of the disagreements* first over our classifications and then over the classification system itself that led to some of the insights from which this book emerged (p.14, emphasis added).

Here these authors confirm the importance of conflict to learning and growth: it is only *aggressive* challenge of individual students' integrity that they reject (p. 227-228; also Noddings 1992).

Several feminist psychologists' research experiences in an elite girls' school raised some related insights (Gilligan 1995). Highlighted here is the personal and political tragedy in which many of the girls seemed to lose their resistant voices as they reached adolescence. Because they lived in the context of patriarchally-defined 'good girl' behavior, these young women felt forced to hide their true feelings and criticisms, in order to lessen the risk of rejection and to protect vital relationships. Adults including teachers, and even the girls themselves as they grew older, came to hear outspokenness and open courage in confronting conflict (which had been common among the younger girls) as rude and disruptive. However, such 'development' is by no means inevitable. On the contrary, the authors point out that the strong and trusting relationships that did exist stemmed not from a lack of conflict, but rather from the capacities of the parties to confront and repair the inevitable disjunctures. Such dispositions toward conflict are learned, and can be modeled and practiced in schools.

Jarred by the researchers' findings about their own school, some of the teachers were provoked to re-consider their own unconscious modeling and perpetuation of 'good girl' manners. Looking at their own development as youngsters, they remembered with gratitude the adults who provided alternative models of conflict behavior:

> ... we could also gratefully recall the women who had allowed our disagreement and rambunctiousness in their presence and who had made us feel whole. And we recognized what it was we had to do as teachers and mothers and therapists and women in relationship.... Unless we stopped hiding in expectations of goodness and control, our behavior would silence any words to girls about speaking in their own voice. Finally, we dared to believe that one could be intelligently disruptive without

> destroying anything except the myths about the high level of female cooperativeness (Gilligan & Brown 1992, p.221).

There are real alternatives to the common perpetuation of girls' docility in the classroom. Caring relationships, including those in public classrooms, thrive when there is no need for self-censorship. On the other hand, when norms of politeness and efficiency make some people's concerns and viewpoints unwelcome or unspeakable, there is neither healthy relationship nor much chance at democracy.

Even when all are involved and sincerely trying to listen to one another, unconscious assumptions (and the demands of 'closure' and 'knowledge acquisition' in academic contexts) can cause the discussion to reinforce, rather than to disrupt and alter, participants' prior understandings and power relations: creating a way to listen/ learn across difference is difficult creative political work (Bickford 1996).

> Instead, we have found ourselves addressed through a different ethic. It's an ethic committed to conflict without, paradoxically, needing the idea of an enemy. It is an ethic that operates not within the logic of oppositions and mutual exclusions, but within the logic of paradoxes and spectrums. ... [This pedagogy] manipulates us into a fluid positioning that sees back and forth across boundaries, and as a result, requires us to take on responsibility for the meanings we will construct.... (Ellsworth 1997, p.177)

Perhaps the most difficult dilemma in teaching conflict in social studies is that we try too hard to resolve it: our attempts at persuasion and consensus-building often inadvertently silence those whose voices are least powerful. Instead, it is possible to facilitate learning opportunities that embrace and encourage multiple viewpoints and paradoxical coexistences.

Feminist Citizenship Education

In teacher preparation programs as well as elementary and secondary schools, the school's culture and context often obstruct the constructive introduction of conflict or criticism. For example, increasing pressures for mandated content coverage, restricted autonomy for teachers, and the ever-present dilemma of lock-step school schedules are among the most frustrating of these dilemmas (Little 1993, Popkewitz 1991). As a result, teaching for inclusive democracy can feel like swimming upstream.

Teacher education and graduate courses provide a golden opportunity to take time for something that seems a luxury to many working teachers -- to listen intently to some of the diverse young people we encounter as "students." For example, when one educational psychology class interviewed academically *successful* girls, they were astonished to discover how many had developed low self-confidence (Ellis 1993). Inquiries like these, along with a supportive yet challenging environment for discussing them, can avoid the defensive resistance that sometimes arises when we tackle difficult social-structural questions.

It helps to look reflectively at schools and teaching as institutions and at students as members of social groups: this is good social science as well as good preparation for teaching it. In a culture that idealizes individualism, it is difficult but crucial to see how we are all shaped by social structures and institutions -- by persistent patterns of relationships among groups, including historically-rooted conceptions of teaching itself, the "women's true profession" (Acker 1987, Laird 1988, Spring 1994). When we re-think our assumptions about what teachers and students 'do,' we are freed to reconceptualize teaching and learning in more democratic ways.

For example, a teacher described what happened when her middle school social studies/English class studied research methods by conducting an observational study on gender equity in their own independent school (Schur 1995). Girl-boy pairs conducted observations in fifth through tenth grade classrooms in their school, using an observational chart they helped

to create and making "anecdotal fieldnotes," to see whether boys talked (or interrupted) more than girls in class discussions. They found that girls and boys spoke up about the same number of times (with wide variation among classrooms), but that boys interrupted more often. At least as important, though, was what happened to the girls and boys who carried out this research:

> The effect on the girls of actually conducting this study was immeasurable. They spoke up passionately throughout our discussions -- some for the first time (Schur 1995, p.147).

If girls' concerns are on the table in social studies lessons, and if they are given equitable opportunities to engage in actively constructing knowledge about those concerns, they are getting better preparation for using their voices as democratic citizens. Airing and examining conflict provides a golden opportunity for learning and for the development/practice of democracy. In this case, careful examination of girls' concerns (in light of their contrast with prevailing views and school practice) was enough to provoke passionate involvement in research activity by a range of students, especially girls, who had been ordinarily silent/silenced in the classroom.

In this global society, however, interpersonal participation is clearly not sufficient to create (or learn) democracy: what kinds of social-level citizen engagement do we teach about (or practice) in school social studies? Defined broadly, politics is participation in the powers of society, including direct service (for example, helping in a hospital or shelter), social participation (for example, participating in a recycling or peer mediation program), advocacy (for example, campaigning against toxic dumping), electoral work (for example, supporting a candidate for school board), cross-cultural activity (for example, traveling, learning another language, or participating in the work of a non-governmental organization), or political listening (self-education and bridge-building across ideological differences (Avery 1994, Merryfield & Remy 1995). The precious and fragile core of

democracy is citizen action to influence government decision-making (Franklin 1998). The citizens excluded from formal democratic procedures for generations, including women, have frequently engaged in 'political' action — exerting informal influence on their own and others' behalf at the social and governmental level — even when their participation was explicitly disallowed within formal structures (Dietz 1989). Participating in such democratic action can open up new understandings about how society works, how people learn outside the coercive environment of the school, and how to influence the governments and social institutions that create our collective future.

Feminist perspectives can illuminate, and help to remediate, the anti-democratic aspects of what sometimes passes for citizenship education. Real inclusion of women's concerns, problems, viewpoints, and cultures inevitably raises conflict -- and conflict is the essence of pluralist democracy. Social studies classrooms can become safer places for diverse young women and men to prepare for powerful democratic citizenship, by practicing thoughtful and open confrontation of conflicts.

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